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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a four-year study that evaluated school library services offered to students with disabilities in two Australian states. Findings regarding staff development activities for school library staff that would assist them in teaching, communicating, and providing for the information needs of students with disabilities are discussed. Results showed that there are currently limited opportunities for school librarians to participate in such programs, beyond those offered in individual schools to the teaching staff as a whole. There is a need for library-specific staff development programs that cover policy formulation, collection development, and adaptive technology aspects of library services for students with disabilities. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/MES)

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Enhancing the skills of school library staff to cater for individual student needs

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Abstract

The author has recently completed a four year study which evaluated school library services offered to students with disabilities in two Australian states. Findings regarding staff development activities for school library staff that would assist them in teaching, communicating and providing for the information needs of students with disabilities are discussed. Results showed that there are currently limited opportunities for school librarians to participate in such programmes, beyond those offered in individual schools to the teaching staff as a whole. There is a need for library-specific staff development programmes that cover policy formulation, collection development and adaptive technology aspects of library services for students with disabilities.

Paper

Background

In compiling the bibliography Equity and Excellence (1) I found a lack of library-specific training materials on the provision of services for people with disabilities, and that few staff development programs on this aspect of service run by libraries had been reported in the literature. This situation is little changed seven years later, and if the viewpoint is narrowed to staff development programs for school library staff, evidence of any library-specific training is

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hard to track down. Wesson (2) suggests school librarians can provide themselves with staff development by visiting other school libraries which cater for students with disabilities, or to undertake some action research in their own library which is focussed on students with disabilities. In Australia, some staff development programmes on service provision for people with disabilities are available (3) but provision is still sporadic (4). None of these programmes have been targeted at school librarians. There is very limited coverage of library services for people with disabilities in preprofessional training programmes (5, 6, 7). Given the pressure most university departments currently face to become self-funding, thereby emphasising the provision of popular mainstream courses, this situation is unlikely to change.

Staff development for school librarians is in general poorly provided for. Heeks & Kinnell (8) found that in the UK there were a range of staff development activities available to school librarians but the identification of those suitable for individual school librarians was inhibited by the lack of confidence by their line managers in assessing their staff development needs. Earlier research by Edwards & Schon (9) identified professional reading, attendance of conferences and seminars, training provided by school districts, involvement in professional associations and formal tertiary education courses as being the chief training activities engaged in by school librarians.

If little is being done for these professionals from the library perspective, what is happening in education circles? Bradley & West (10) investigated the staff development needs of classroom teachers in mainstream schools who were teaching students with disabilities. Results showed that teachers wanted staff development which covered: how to modify educational programmes; working and teaching in a team; the impact of the inclusion of a student with a disability on other students in the class; knowledge of specific disabilities; attitudes to disability; expectations of students with disabilities included in their classes; and background information about special education, integration and inclusion. Unless teachers have studied special education in either pre- or post-professional courses, they may have no knowledge of these areas. In the Australian state of New South Wales, all teacher training courses now include a compulsory unit on special education. Thus any newly qualified teachers in that state who go on to train as school librarians, will have some background to help them as librarians in catering for students with disabilities.

The Study

I have just completed a four year study which evaluated the library services provided to students with disabilities enrolled in mainstream schools. Data about the availability of staff development programmes and training needs for school librarians was collected through both case studies and a longitudinal survey. The survey instrument, a self-administered questionnaire, included two relevant questions. The first asked if any staff development programmes related to students with disabilities had been offered in the school, but invited comments about this topic. The second asked about the awareness of school librarians of disability legislation that affected library services, and those who were aware were then asked to identify the source through which they became aware of the legislation. These included the school principal, library literature, professional networks, educational publications (including professional literature and publications made available through the education system), the media, or training/education.

Fourteen schools across the two states participated as case studies. In conducting interviews in case study schools, school librarians were asked about the staff development programmes that had been made available to themselves or their staff. School library staff discussed their personal experience of disability. Special education teachers/co-ordinators were asked what type of staff development programmes they had made available to staff in the school, and whether library staff were included.

Results

The first questionnaire was mailed to 1454 primary and secondary schools in the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales in 1994, and elicited a response from 493 schools (34%). The second questionnaire was sent to these 493 schools, which included government, independent (private) and Catholic schools, eighteen months later, eliciting a response rate of 55%. This second questionnaire was essentially the same, with a few modifications to facilitate the longitudinal nature of the study. For example, the question about staff development was changed to ask if staff development programmes had been offered since the time of the first survey.

Two hundred and seven respondents (52%) to Survey 1 reported that staff development programmes related to students with disabilities had been available. One hundred and four respondents (27%) to Survey 2 reported that such programmes had been available in the period since Survey 1. Qualitative responses to this question indicated that most of the training was in-house. There were no library-specific programmes. Training covering a wide range of disabilities was mentioned in the qualitative comments; visual impairment, hearing disability, and learning disability were the most frequently mentioned. The programmes were presented either through special staff meetings, inservices or talks by personnel from external organisations, or by staff being sent to external courses; this latter option was only available to special education staff. Where school librarians were aware of disability legislation, their main sources of information had been evenly distributed across the six sources identified. There was a drop in the percentage of respondents quoting training as a source between 1994 and 1996, from 22% to 15%. The two surveys showed that 57% of respondents were totally unaware that legislation existed which affected the services offered to students with disabilities.

Several school library staff members working in case study schools did have personal experience of disability. This came from a range of experiences : teaching, community work, or through the involvement of family members in the disability field. This did appear to be a factor in the understanding of the needs of students with disabilities. Special education staff in nearly all case study schools did provide training activities of some kind for teaching staff, but these either did not include non-teaching staff, or were held outside of school hours and non-teaching staff were not willing to stay to attend in their own time. Schools often provided intensive staff development programmes when students with disabilities were first enrolled, but this was not an ongoing activity as it was presumed there was no further need. Often special education teachers briefed a small group of teachers who taught particular students with disabilities, but the school librarian was not included.

Discussion

The survey results show that very few opportunities were provided for the library staff to participate in staff development programmes related to service provision for students with disabilities. Only just over half of the schools with students with disabilities enrolled, in 1994, had offered whole school programmes, and in 1996 this had dropped to 27%. Although professional library staff would no doubt have been able to attend any programmes offered to the teaching staff, it is questionable whether these programmes would also have been offered to paraprofessional or clerical staff in the school library. It is interesting to note that more staff development programmes had been offered in the government sector. Given this is the largest school sector, this could be due to the availability of training activities run at regional or state level for school staff.

Although school librarians in case study schools were able to attend training activities offered to the whole school teaching staff, none had received any library-specific training, or provided it for paraprofessional or clerical library staff. In some schools there was little or no information provided about students with disabilities to the school librarian by special education staff, often because the special education staff failed to recognise that the school librarian would likely to deal with most students in the school, and should be included in briefing sessions about particular students. The lack of ongoing disability training in some

schools did not take into account the needs of newly appointed staff.

The Training Needs of School Librarians

The survey results, discussions with librarians in case study schools and in schools visited during fieldwork in Canada and the United Kingdom indicate that staff development programmes are needed in several areas, some of which correspond to Bradley & West's findings (11). School library staff who do not have personal experience of disability would benefit from disability awareness training, but the greatest need is for school librarians to receive specific information about the students with disabilities in their school and how to deal with them, teach them and meet their needs. School librarians should be included in briefing sessions on particular students and also included in the meetings of students' individual learning support groups when information resourcing is an issue to be discussed. This includes being given the opportunity to work with special education staff in modifying materials used in information skills teaching to suit individual students. However school librarians need to ensure they always attend general staff meetings and other forums where information about students with disabilities may be disseminated. Training in working with others is not such an issue for school librarians, as they are experienced in this area through their endeavours to integrate information skills teaching into the curriculum and by working alongside other library staff, although some do work in isolation. But as classroom teachers and special education teachers do receive such training, needed as many have them have worked independently in the past, information flow and co-operation between them and the school librarian should improve.

School librarians would benefit from gaining knowledge about special education, the purpose and processes of integration and inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream schools, and particularly the legislation governing this area. Beyond the staff development needs identified by Bradley & West, school librarians need training in the library-specific areas of policy formulation, collection management and technology requirements. The survey results showed that 5% of respondents had a formal policy on services for students with disabilities in 1994, which dropped to 3% in 1996. Very few case study school libraries had formal policy statements, even those with exemplary school librarians. The lack of policy statements indicates lack of awareness of need. Both survey and case study results showed that school librarians provide good collections of disability information and fiction that treats disability in a realistic and sensitive way. However most have a limited knowledge of the alternative format materials that are available and external libraries or organisations where these can be accessed or borrowed. Although school librarians are experienced users of information technology, there was no evidence of recognition of the role of technology in compensating for disabilities. Adaptive technology can provide many options, such as access to print for visually impaired students, and keyboard use for students with little motor control, and is provided only in a very small number of school libraries.

Meeting these staff development needs involves a variety of mechanisms. Wesson's (12) suggestion that the individual should take charge of their own staff development is realistic, given the isolation experienced by most school librarians and the frequent lack of understanding of their staff development needs by their line managers. Professional reading can be pursued by the individual, and there are several good videos and some training packages on disability and disability awareness which could be used effectively by one person or by a small library staff together. Some school districts and school clusters do provide staff development programmes for school library staff, and these could address collection management and information technology issues. Conferences and seminars held by professional associations are another avenue, although my experience indicates that specific seminars held at a district or local level will be more successful than running a session at a general conference. Opportunities for staff development are so limited for school librarians, and emphasis on information technology so great, that any topic considered at all peripheral will be ignored where a choice of sessions is offered at a conference.

Conclusion

Staff development programmes on services to students with disabilities are rarely provided for school librarians or other school library staff. University departments offering courses in librarianship and information management should be encouraged to cover library services to people with disabilities in mainstream curricula, so that newly trained professionals have been sensitised to some extent to the needs of this client group. Encouragement of staff development activities at a personal level and lobbying of professional associations and education authorities to provide more programmes in this area, seem to be the most viable solutions.

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